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## THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ITS USAGE IN EDUCATIONAL STUDIES<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT. Guðmundsson Gestur, Mikiewicz Piotr, *The concept of social capital and its usage in educational studies* [Koncepcja kapitału społecznego i jej zastosowanie w badaniach edukacyjnych]. Studia Edukacyjne nr 22, 2012, Poznań 2012, pp. 55-79. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISBN 978-83-232-2502-7. ISSN 1233-6688

The aim of the article is to elaborate the theoretical background of the social capital concept. During the last decade the concept of Social Capital has probably been the most widely used concept in international sociology and on the intersection of sociology and educational studies. Social capital has become one of the basic explanatory variables for social inequalities, underdevelopment of some countries and neighbourhoods, level of delinquency and quality of life (in economic and psychological meaning). Often in sociological readings one can find misunderstanding of the meaning of the social capital concept and misleading presumptions of the social mechanisms it is meant to explain. In this study authors examine the meaning of the term in main theoretical contexts and its usage in educational research.

**Key words:** social capital, education, Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, Robert D. Putnam

### Introduction

The concept of 'social capital' became one of the most prominent in nowadays social sciences. Although first usage of the term 'social capital' took place at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, it took some time before it became an element of wider sociological discourse. As some sources

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claim<sup>2</sup>, the first author using the term in a way close to the one we know nowadays was Lyda Judson Hanifan, who dealt with the role of rural community schools.

He was keen to stress that his use of “capital” was metaphorical and that by “social capital”. He meant the progressive way in which a community – its spirit and its joint activities – is built. Hanifan was particularly interested in practical means and initiatives through which a task could be accomplished, mentioning the important role of community gatherings, first for general entertainment, and later for some constructive purposes. But he already showed “some theoretical insight by identifying social capital with the building up of social connections and sociability” as he put it with “good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse”.<sup>3</sup>

As Castiglione, van Deth and Wolleb claim, Hanifan’s intuition remained both underdeveloped and unexplored for the next sixty years as it did not offer any dramatic new insight beyond traditional convictions about the importance of civic education, or the Tocquevillian analysis of the socialising role that public associations play in civil life. However the term itself, or equivalent renderings, appeared in economics and social sciences between 1950s and 1970s in several works of authors dealing with human capital and urban studies on one hand (Steely, Jacobs, Loury) and social networks on the other (Granovetter). And this is (as we might suppose) the original context of the social capital origin as a theory and research strategy – the relation between education and human capital and neighbourhood and social networks. It is, as supposed, very important starting point of further analyses in this study. Education, more closely, educational performance, is the starting point of the further development of the idea, elaborated in two parallel theoretical fields by James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu.

It is also remarkable, that despite this original deployment (which will be examined later) the nowadays ‘success’ of the term is not associated with educational studies, but in the first place with the civic society and political studies. It is so thanks to the contribution of Robert D. Putnam, his works on Italian society (1993) and later transfer into USA context (2000). Basing on theoretical approach of James Coleman, Putnam proposed original theory of social capital, which started a wide discussion within social sciences and far beyond, about the importance of

<sup>2</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York 2000; M. Woolcock, *Social capital and Economic Development: towards a theoretical synthesis and a policy framework*, *Theory and Society*, 1998, 27/2, s. 151-208.

<sup>3</sup> D. Castiglione, J. Wan Deth, G. Wolleb, *Social capital's fortune*, [w:] *The handbook of social capital*, red. A. Castiglione i in., Oxford 2008, s. 2.

social ties and relations. In spite of a little group of critics<sup>4</sup> the term of social capital has become an element of 'pocket dictionary' of each social scientists, which furthermore met the interest of economists and became an element of global policy. Social capital has become one of the basic explanatory variables for social inequalities, underdevelopment of some countries and neighbourhoods, level of delinquency and quality of life (in economic and psychological meaning). For policy makers SC is an interesting tool for social policy, for economists an important factor of economic development. As Dario Gaggio (2004) suggests, the concept of social capital seems to promise a reunion of split and incoherent social sciences. Alejandro Portes argues that it is perceived as a cure for all social problems (1998). This of course makes the term overused and often misleading; often in sociological readings one can find misunderstanding of the meaning of the social capital concept and misleading presumptions of the social mechanisms it is meant to explain. In this study we would like to examine the meaning of the term in main theoretical contexts and its usage in educational research.

### **Social Capital – what does it mean?**

During the last decade the concept of Social Capital has probably been the most widely used concept in international sociology and on the intersection of sociology and educational studies. It is an empirically oriented concept and therefore it is suitable to start with Nan Lin's operational definition of social capital as „the resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for action.“<sup>5</sup> This definition emphasises that social capital does not have its home base within individuals but in social networks, while on the other hand it is used by individuals. All the main theoretical contributions, of Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam and Lin, agree that social capital is embedded in social relationships, but they differ as to their perspectives on the use of social capital. Coleman focuses on the individual use, Bourdieu on the use of social capital by certain social groups, and Putnam focuses on the function of social capital for communities. Furthermore Coleman focuses on the use of social capital for educational purposes, while Bourdieu and Lin also emphasise the use of social capital in business or in search for jobs and

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<sup>4</sup> See i.e. B. Fine, *Social Capital versus Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium*, New York 2001; *Theories of Social capital. Researchers Behaving badly*, London 2010.

<sup>5</sup> N. Lin, *Social Capital. A Theory of Social Structure and Action*, Cambridge 2001, s. 25.

social status. Finally, Bourdieu stresses the interconnection of social capital with economic and cultural capital in the reproduction of class inequalities and hierarchies, while Coleman finds that social capital is much more democratically distributed than the other capital forms and thus a powerful engine of social mobility.

Understanding social capital as the resources in social relations and relationships implies that the concept has deep roots in sociology that can be traced back to Marx, Weber and Durkheim. However, these resources were not conceptualised as capital until the 1980s, when sociologists started to conduct theoretically and empirically systematic research into the connection between social ties and education. James Coleman developed his concept of social capital to explain central workings of human capital, elaborating on the ideas of Gary Becker while Bourdieu added the term to the concepts of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu) that had been developing since the 1960s.

We start with Coleman who played a central role taking the concept of social capital into the mainstream of sociological research from the late 1980s, then deal with Putnam who has for more than a decade been the dean of social capital research and then take up Bourdieu whose critical perspective of social capital is important to include. From these theoretical positions we will deal with some empirical research on SC and education, and finally we will set up some landmarks for our own comparative investigation of educational history in Poland and Iceland.

### **Social capital by James S. Coleman**

Already during the 1960s James S. Coleman (1926-95) earned a strong reputation through his thorough empirical research and innovative analysis on youth (high-school) culture and on racial inequalities in education in the US. He carried on through his lifetime with huge empirical projects on high school trajectories and later he developed into a central figure in the making of „Rational Choice Theory“ which combined sociology and economics. One of his major contributions was his short but seminal article „Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital“ that was published in *American Journal of Sociology* in 1988. Here Coleman drew on his empirical findings and focussed on family relations and community relations that could explain when pupils and students would perform better at school than should be expected from their socio-economic background. With this article Coleman established the concept of Social Capital as a key explanatory concept of social mobility. In a relatively simple and clear form he hereby laid the foundation for the use of this concept.

To understand fully his approach, we must see the use of social capital as a part of the general rational choice theory built by Coleman. From this perspective individuals are free agents, purposely and rationally acting to maximise utility. Individuals are affected by the structural features within which they act, as a source of information and general circumstances of action.

If we begin with a theory of rational action, in which each actor has control over certain resources and interests in certain resources and events, then social capital constitutes a particular kind of resource available to an actor. Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, makes possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible (...). Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors. It is not lodged in the actors themselves or in physical implements of productions“.<sup>6</sup>

For Coleman Social Capital is on one hand an aspect of social structure and a mean to facilitate individuals to improve their situation and attain other social goals. Thus social capital is both an asset of a community and of individuals, but in his research Coleman paid primarily attention to individual mobilization of resources that are embedded in social relations. It was primarily through such mobilization that Coleman identified social capital, defining it by its function, not by intention.

The general construction of social capital lies in:

1. Obligations, expectations and trustworthiness in structures
2. Information channels
3. Norms and effective sanctions.<sup>7</sup>

Drawing from his huge samples he could establish a connection between educational performance and family and community relations. Coleman's conceptualisation owes a great deal to Durkheim's emphasis on social cohesion. According to this view, young people who become socially mobile tend to come from families with strong internal relations, where parents encourage and support their children through school. These families are likely to be highly integrated into a community that may be centred around a church and/or other organisations, where common norms and beliefs are reinforced in everyday interaction. Members of such communities have a high level of trust in central institutions, they are likely to offer help to their neighbours and take to some

<sup>6</sup> J.S. Coleman, *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*, American Journal of Sociology, 1988, 94, s. 98.

<sup>7</sup> See: *ibidem*, s. 102-105.

extent common responsibility for upbringing. Like Durkheim (in *Suicide*, 1897) had found that Catholics in general are stronger in social cohesion and solidarity than Protestants, Coleman<sup>8</sup> found high success rate in Catholic high schools and ascribed it to tight communities surrounding the schools.

Coleman not only built on empirical material but also developed theoretical argumentation. Here the ‘closure’ of social relations in groups and networks is of primary importance. Coleman argued that such closed networks would have greater potential than more loose networks to socialise and regulate behaviour according to norms that are generally accepted in the network. When families with close relations are embedded in communities of closure, the effect of peer relationships would furthermore be minimized, and Coleman was generally sceptical about peer influence, as expressed in his *Adolescence Society* (1961). As Alejandro Portes argues (1998), social capital is in the first place a means (or aspect) of social control. Effective sanctions, within structure of strong ties and structural closure make a ‘positive social space’ for socialisation and upbringing of young people – in the end in school performance.

Other researchers and theoreticians have elaborated on Coleman’s concept and its operationalization in empirical research. For instance Fukuyama (1995) has elaborated on the importance of trust for economic development, but the best known elaboration is found in the works of Robert Putnam.

### **Social capital by Robert D. Putnam**

In the same year as Coleman died and Fukuyama published his elaboration on Coleman’s work, Robert Putnam coined the phrase that made Social Capital the in-concept of American sociology „Bowling Alone. America’s Declining Social Capital“ (Putnam, 1995). Putnam largely took over Coleman’s approach, both theoretically and the method of gathering huge empirical material from varied areas in US. But he changed the focus from social mobility and the individual mobilisation of the social capital in their social relations to social capital as features of social life that enable collective action and constitute a part of social structure.

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<sup>8</sup> In: J.S. Coleman, T. Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools. The Impact of Communities*, New York 1987.

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.<sup>9</sup>

“by ‘social capital’ I mean features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives”.<sup>10</sup>

Such definition leads to research focus on density of social networks, depth of involvement in formal and informal social organizations, voluntary civic activity. Social capital can be analyse as a volume or level of social activity and diagnose in terms of low or high level of devotion to community life.

Putnam saw alarming developments taking place in America, summing up with the demise of the prototypical social activity of American common man who now was found bowling alone. In his bestselling book (2000), Putnam gathers extensive material on political, civic and religious participation, as well as indicators of informal social connections, voluntary engagement and sense of trust and reciprocity. The graphs are depressing in Putnam’s optics. With few exceptions the indicators on participation and trust have been falling for the last decades.

However, Putnam finds that there are new networks and groups that run counter to the general tendency of declining social activities and at the same time new and widely used channels for communication have established highly globalised networks and communication channels. Here the development is so rapid that Putnam’s account from 2001 must be seen as mostly out-dated and the research into new social ties on the Internet and Mobile phones is still too rudimentary to draw secure conclusions. However, Putnam insists that Internet relation will never produce a Social Capital that will replace the capital based on face-to-face interaction.

While Coleman (and Bourdieu) emphasised the close social ties in families and communities that are based on shared norms, beliefs etc., Putnam has adopted a different view. Based on Mark Granovetter’s study (1973) more distant ties are often more useful to find jobs or business opportunities, and this „strength of weak ties“ has later been trans-

<sup>9</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, New York 2000, s. 19.

<sup>10</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. America’s Declining Social Capital*, *Journal of Democracy*, 1995, 6, 1, s. 56, here cited from Schuller et al., 2000.

formed into the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. The former type is the type of the close community, with its strong and continuous social regulation, while the second type rather consists of acquaintances to members of other communities. Putnam cites Xavier de Souza Briggs (1997) for characterising the qualities of these two types as bonding social capital is good to „getting by“ while bridging social capital is crucial for „getting ahead“.

Bonding capital is good for under-girding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity... Bridging networks, by contrast, are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion.... Moreover, bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves.... Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40.<sup>11</sup>

Michael Woolcock, a social scientist working with the World Bank has argued that many of the key contributions prior to *Bowling Alone* failed to make a proper distinction between different types of social capital. He distinguished between:

- *Bonding social capital* which denotes ties between people in similar situations, such as immediate family, close friends and neighbours.
- *Bridging social capital*, which encompasses more distant ties of like persons, such as loose friendships and workmates.
- *Linking social capital*, which reaches out to unlike people in dissimilar situations, such as those who are entirely outside of the community, thus enabling members to leverage a far wider range of resources than are available in the community.<sup>12</sup>

The concept is being put further by David Halpern (2005), who produces multilevel model of social capital functioning, which makes social capital theory, a theory of society *per se*. Halpern indicates three dimensions of social capital: *networks*, *norms* and *means of social control* on three levels of social organisation: *micro*, *mezzo* and *macro*. They interplay and affect elements from each level. Thus volume of social capital on each level contributes to the assets of social capital in entire society.

In this perspective social capital seems to be indeed a cure for all social problems and ultimately positive factor. As Putnam claims:

First, social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily... People often might be better off if they cooperate, with each doing her share. (...).Second, social capital greases the wheels that allow communities to advance

<sup>11</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, s. 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> See: M. Woolcock, *The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes*, Isuma: Canadian Journal of Policy Research, 2001, 2, 1, s. 13-14.



smoothly. Where people are trusting and trustworthy, and where they are subject to repeated interactions with fellow citizens, everyday business and social transactions are less costly (...).

A third way in which social capital improves our lot is by widening our awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked (...) When people lack connection to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views, whether in the give or take of casual conversation or in more formal deliberation. Without such an opportunity, people are more likely to be swayed by their worse impulses (...).

The networks that constitute social capital also serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information that facilitates achieving our goals.... Social capital also operates through psychological and biological processes to improve individual's lives. (...) Community connectedness is not just about warm fuzzy tales of civic triumph. In measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference to our lives.<sup>13</sup>

With Coleman Putnam started out emphasising the need of general trust within communities, but later<sup>14</sup> he favoured the term „reciprocity“ as he pointed out that trust can be passive, while reciprocity stresses the active actions. Reciprocity is for Putnam not only bilateral, it is *generalised reciprocity* that forms the basis of social capital.

While Coleman could be criticised for faith in „old school“ cohesive communities, Putnam pointed out in his analysis of political culture in Italy<sup>15</sup> that ‚traditional‘ villages and towns in Southern Italy were hierarchical and authoritarian and fostered mutually distrustful citizens, while the more modern towns in the North rather fostered voluntary civic participation. Thus, his ideal for communities with rich social capital belongs clearly to the Durkheimian category of ‚organic solidarity‘ rather than ‚mechanical solidarity‘.

### Social capital by Pierre Bourdieu

Most citations on Bourdieu's concept of social capital are from his 1983 essay „The Forms of Capital“ that has later been reprinted in numerous textbooks. This essay is 8 pages long, and many scholars who cite it seem largely unaware of other writings of Bourdieu and of the fact that he developed his concepts throughout his whole life and insisted that the important quality of sociological concepts is how they can be used to analyse empirical material.

<sup>13</sup> See: R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, s. 288-290.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Making Democracy work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton 1993.

It is important to see Bourdieu's concept of social capital as a part of a larger theory and in relation to other key concepts, such as *habitus*, *field*, *symbolic violence*, *misrecognition* and, of course *economic*, *cultural* and *symbolic capital*. This theory evolved gradually through various empirical research and a meticulous scrutiny of data and findings, helped by Bourdieu's philosophical training and his steadily growing application of the sociological heritage, from Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Mauss to Norbert Elias, Raymond Aron, Erving Goffman, Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and others. During this journey Bourdieu's definitions and usage of the key concepts evolved. In „the forms of capital“ Bourdieu distinguishes between three forms of capital – economic, cultural, and social, seemingly at the same level. However, in his empirical analyses social capital never had that position, he rarely used the concept, compared with the concepts of economic, symbolic and cultural capital.

Donald Broady (1991) has convincingly argued that Bourdieu gradually developed a primary distinction between economic and symbolic capital and identified social and cultural capital as specific forms of the symbolic. In the social spaces that Bourdieu analysed he found cultural capital most important and social capital as only secondary, although he pointed to some events and development where social capital was a central explanatory concept, and his approach would not rule out that in some cases social capital can be the central most important form of capital.

We must remember that general term 'capital' has for Bourdieu relational character. It is always connected to the logic of the field, govern by habitus, depend on field recognitions. Every form of 'capital' is 'a capital' only within particular context – in other field it is not only meaningless, it does not exist. From this perspective, it shouldn't be stated, that some forms of capital are more important, but we should investigate the whole set and interplay of capitals within the field occupied by agents equipped with habitus.

One must remember that Bourdieu's explanations of social actional-ways emphasise structure, although not in a deterministic way. His concept of habitus aims at grounding individual action and consciousness in structural conditions and history. In other words, in contrary to Coleman's view, social actor of Bourdieu is never free and rational. He/she is rational within socially structured frame of habitus, which is ultimately shaped by class origin. Individuals are 'reasonable' rather than 'rational' and it is significant difference of language between Bourdieu and Coleman or neoclassical economy.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See: P. Bourdieu, *The social structure of the economy*, Cambridge 2005.

Social capital is always an element of the whole explanatory model used by Bourdieu. Having this in mind, it seems safe to ascribe the following definition of social capital a lasting value in Bourdieu's writing. For him social capital is:

made up of social obligations or connections [...] the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership of a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.<sup>17</sup>

This means i.e. that Bourdieu defines social capital as collective assets that can be used by individuals or subgroups within the network:

the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilise and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom is connected.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the wider network we are connected to and 'richer' members of the network, the higher volume of the social capital we possess. Here it must be borne in mind that Bourdieu did not define as capital any heap of resources that individuals can use, as some of the writers on social capital seem to do. Bourdieu declared<sup>19</sup> that his approach presupposed a series of breaks from Marxism, but in fact those were rather breaks with French traditions of Marxism, especially their class theory, than with Marx. Bourdieu's theory of capital is rather an expansion of Marx' capital theory than a break. Most important here is that Bourdieu capital concept just as Marx' implies that heaps of resources can only be called capital when they also contain social relationships, power relations and social mechanisms. Like other forms of symbolic capital it usually requires hard labour to acquire social capital, it is constantly threatened by devaluation and it has to be accumulated. It consists in accumulated resources from the past that give its owner power over production of such resources in the present and future.

Social capital does not take much space in the empirical work of Bourdieu, and when applied the concept is always linked with other key concepts, as shown in the following examples.

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<sup>17</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge 1983/1993, s. 248.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, s. 21.

<sup>19</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge 1991, s. 229-252.

In *Distinction* (1979/1984) Bourdieu presents the capital concepts as a trinity, with social capital ranking lowest:

The overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually useable resources and powers – economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital.“ (p. 114)

Originally published the same year as ‘The Forms of Capital’, the essay ‘The Field of Cultural Production’ (English translation, 1993) contained two usages of the Social Capital concept:

The crisis of the 1880s affected the Naturalist novelists severely, especially those of the second generation, as well as a proportion of the writers who, having started out as poets, converted into the novel genre, with the psychological novel, a cultural and especially a social capital much greater than that of their Naturalist rivals.“ (p. 54)

„It is also because economic capital provides the guarantees (assurances) which can be the basis of self-assurance, audacity and indifference to profit – dispositions which, together with the flair associated with possession of a large social capital and the corresponding familiarity with the field, [...] point towards the outposts, the most exposed positions of the avant-garde, and towards the riskiest investments, which are also, however, very often the most profitable symbolically, and in the long run, at least for the earliest investors.“ (p. 68)

In *The Rules of Art* (1992/1996), Bourdieu’s historical analysis of the genesis and structure of the literary field in France, social capital is mentioned twice (in 400 pages). In both cases he is pointing out that social capital adds to the assets of cultural and/or economic capital and is highly dependent on habitus, as a certain writer is described as being „totally devoid of social capital and, as is often the case, of the dispositions that allow its acquisition“ (p. 361, n 65). And furthermore:

The sense of placement/investment seems to be one of the dispositions most closely linked to social and geographical origin, and consequently, through the social capital which is its correlative, one of the mediations through which the effects of a contrast in social origins, and especially between Parisian and provincial roots, manifest themselves in the logic of the field.<sup>20</sup>

These usages show that Bourdieu primarily used the concept of social capital as a correlative and mediation of economic and cultural capital, but at the same time he assumed that social capital could have more primary importance when looking into other social spaces and other research questions. For Bourdieu social capital is intrinsically linked to social inequality, it is one of the assets which are passed on from one

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, s. 262.

generation to another and it is closely linked to other assets, mainly cultural capital and habitus, so we can sum up with Horvat:

Social capital can be conceived of as the set of valuable connections of an individual. Unlike Coleman, Bourdieu recognizes the unequal value of various network ties. In the school setting, the ties that are valuable are by-and-large middle-class.<sup>21</sup>

## Two meanings of social capital

The above presented review shows that there are at least two different meanings of social capital. It is strongly connected with theoretical background of origin of the term. For Coleman, and furthermore for Putnam, social capital is:

1. Feature of the community – although analyses are put at the usage of the capital by individuals
2. Stress is on the ties, relations, trust – structure which enable individuals to act more effectively
3. The stronger ties the better – more closed community, with dense relationships and more civic activity, the higher volume of social capital. There is an assumption that in such circumstances people will cooperate more often for common good.
4. Social capital is an unexpected effect of purposive action – people do not act to build social capital, they act to achieve their particular goals. If they cooperate they create social structures which help them to achieve their needs.

On the other hand, the tradition derived from Bourdieu shows social capital as

1. Feature of individual agents and groups of agents, who possess different forms of capital useful within particular field
2. Stress on the individual investment and usage of the membership in the social network
3. The volume of social capital depends on size of the network and on assets possessed by members of the network
4. Social capital is an effect of investments. Social capital is produced by multiple economic and social actions and is embedded in social relations of power and ownership, but it is largely up to the active quest of individuals and groups to activate and use this capital.

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<sup>21</sup> E. Horvat, McNamara, E.B. Weininger, A. Lareau, *From Social Ties to Social Capital: Class differences in the Relations between Schools and Parent Networks*, American Educational Research Journal, 2003, 40, 2, s. 347.

Such recognition leads to two different strategies of sociological investigation on social capital and education. The first strategy, derived from Coleman's and Putnam's tradition, will focus on communities and their features – often applied questions about civic activity, participation in grassroots movements, local gatherings, general characteristic of human capital of the community – measured by level of formal education. As an example we can point *Social Diagnosis* (2009) in Poland, where social capital is operationalized by: generalised social trust, membership in nongovernmental organisations, participation in voluntary public gatherings, voluntary participation and initiation of social actions for public good in local community, voting in parliamentary elections, general attitude towards democracy.

The second possible strategy, derived from Bourdieu's tradition, leads to more process oriented analyses of individual actions, strategies of parents and pupils, how they act within the social sphere to achieve their goals. Such a strategy can also lead researchers to investigate how occupational groups and professions use their social capital to strengthen the recognition of their cultural capital, not least through education. At the same time it should be accompanied with investigation of recognition in the field, habitus etc. It means that such strategy requires rather different research methods and tools – rather qualitative than quantitative, rather case studies than gathering collective data, rather insights than generalisations. Bourdieu's concept of social capital is far less quantifiable than his concepts of economic and cultural capital.

### **Social capital conceptualisation for educational research**

Adopting the concept developed by Robert Putnam one may attempt to look for reasons of inequalities in access to education between youth from various backgrounds by analysing the degree of social capital in individual types of communities or in specific population groups. Social capital in this case means the degree of social engagement of residents. The above seems to be the most popular way to study social capital and it involves the application of quantitative measurements of membership in associations, of knowledge about the local government or amount of time devoted to social life. It is an analysis using the "large/small" categories: the larger and deeper the knowledge of political mechanisms, of neighbours, the bigger the engagement in social life, the stronger the social capital.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See e.g. B. Fedyszak-Radziejowska, *Kapitał społeczny wsi – w poszukiwaniu utraconego zaufania*, [w:] *Kapitał ludzki i zasoby społeczne wsi. Ludzie – społeczność lokalna –*

This is how Putnam himself describes the use of social capital in the field of education:

Bob and Rosemary Smith, parents of six-year-old Jonathan, live in an urban community in which there is an equal number of good and bad things going on. Bob and Rosemary support the idea of public education and they would like their six-year-old child to interact with children of various social backgrounds, which a public school offers. But the local primary school is a mess: teachers are de-praved, paint is peeling off the walls and there is no money for extracurricular activities or for new computers. Concerned about the conditions of their son's education, Bob and Rosemary have a choice. They may take their child from the public school and send him to a private one or they may stay and try to improve the situation at the public school. What to do?<sup>23</sup>

The solution is to get involved in the starting of a parent-teacher association. Their social capital plays a fundamental role here because the more social contacts the Smiths have and the higher trust of the community they enjoy the more parents will become involved in the work of such an organisation and will form a lobby to pressure local authorities to provide financial and organisational support for the local school. On one hand, such an association serves as a testing ground for democratic habits and attitudes of the people involved, and on the other hand it reinforces the feeling of interdependence and mutual responsibility across the local community. Another effect is the creation of mutual support networks between association members. Besides, by gathering for meetings and discussions, people get to know each other better, build and reinforce their friendships which may be cultivated later outside their activity for the school. In this way the community becomes better integrated and socially coherent. "All these gains – civic skills, social support, professional contacts, volunteer labour, movie going partners - arose because the Smiths wanted to put computers in their kid's school."<sup>24</sup>

Trying to assess the impact of school and the role of social capital in these processes we focus on evaluating the quality of civic culture of a given community. The relevant research projects try to discover whether the residents of a given community have significant civic knowledge – whether they know the mechanisms of democracy, local government, whether they know how to influence these mechanisms? Are they involved in political life, do they take active part in elections,

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*edukacja*, red. K. Szafraniec, Warszawa 2006, s. 71-120; J. Czapiński, *Kapitał społeczny*, [w:] *Diagnoza społeczna 2009. Warunki i jakość życia Polaków*, red. J. Czapiński, T. Panek, s. 204-214; available at: <http://www.diagnoza.com/>

<sup>23</sup> R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, s. 289.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, s. 290.

are they members of local organisations? Do they often meet other residents, is their social life fulfilling? In other words, is the structure of mutual relationships within the community dense and strong or, using the terminology of other analytical systems, is there a strong social bond within the community or whether people are isolated from one another and the bonds are weak?

Another dimension of the analysis is the question about the type of social capital of a given community in relation to the distinction into bonding and bridging social capital. Are strong bonds prevailing within the community but there are no bridges to other groups and resources or do we find such connections and readiness for contacts with others, with those from outside our own group? An important question that arises when one thinks about the bonding social capital is who does this bond connect? What are the characteristic features of the group defined as one's own? When one considers bridging social capital, the main question is what groups, what cultures and what lifestyles the members of the specified communities build bridges to?

Using the concept originating from the work of James Coleman, one can see a wider area of social interdependencies. What especially needs to be indicated here is the double nature of social capital – its intra-familial and extra-familial aspects. Differences in school achievement of rural and urban youth may be caused by different family models, different involvement of parents in supporting their child in learning, different quality of contacts with relatives, different degree of parental control over the child (measured e.g. by the number of the child's friends known to the parents). Besides, when analysing extra-familial social capital, one should take into account (like in the case of using Putnam's concept) the network of social contacts, membership in organisations and religious practices.

Following the above train of thought we should analyse family relations, the quality and type of contact between parents and children, family structure and types of support that young people can receive from their families. Moreover, our attention should be focused on the extra-familial social capital, i.e. on the relations within the local community. Are there any clear norms and rules shared by members of a given community and do the mechanisms of social control operate properly? What is the degree of trust in other people and in the institutions that are to enforce the above control?

Using the example of Putnam's Smith family we will analyse whether they may count on the help of their relatives, whether they do homework with their son and whether they are interested in who their son plays after school with. We will also consider whether other parents



support the Smiths through exercising control over the behaviour of Jonathan on his way to and from school, and through playing the role of guardians of norms and values as they observe children playing in the street and admonishing them if they infringe the socially accepted principles.

When we adopt the perspective proposed by Bourdieu, our attention is shifted to other areas. For Bourdieu, social capital is the resource of an individual or a network of individuals, and not of a community. Bourdieu points out not only the number or range of social contacts enabling access to other resources but also the “quality” of the people with whom we interact (their cultural and economic capital). The analysis of social capital in this case does not only mean measuring the amount of this resource but it involves the analysis of the process of building and using it (consciously or not). The difference in school achievement of rural and urban youth may be a result of different ways in which social capital is used. Where social capital is treated as a resource of individuals, one should ask about the quality of the network of social contacts between residents of specified communities and members of specified families. What resources in the form of social contacts, relations of mutual recognitions and obligations do individuals and their families have? What economic and cultural resources do the above contacts give them access to? How do they build the above capital, what strategies are applied to build the above networks? Are the resources they gain access to in the above way useful and functional in the processes of reaching social status? Thus, an analysis of social practice is needed, an observation of concrete behaviours or analysis of the parents’ discourse about the school. Taking again the example of the Smiths given by Putnam, we should ask about what friends Bob and Rosemary have, what cultural resources their social networks can lead to and how they use these contacts to support the education of Jonathan.

### **Social capital and education – short review of empirical research**

Especially since the late 1990s there has been a vast explosion in empirical research into social capital. Although much research<sup>25</sup> has indicated that social capital may have greater impact in the realm of economy and after education is completed, a considerable proportion of

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<sup>25</sup> See: M. Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, *American Journal of Sociology*, 1973, 78, 1, s. 360-380; Lin N., *Social Capital. A Theory of Social Structure and Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

research has been centred around the connection between social ties and educational attainment, which is also the research interest of this paper.

Several overviews over theoretical contributions and empirical research into social capital have stressed that there is no uniform definition of the term Social Capital, except in the broad sense of „resources that flow through relational ties.“<sup>26</sup> Overviews generally report that empirical measurements of social capital vary greatly; there are different indicators, and even similar indicators can be expected to have different meanings in different types of communities.

However, an important general trend can be observed. While Coleman put the emphasis on communities with close ties— Catholic communities or other communities where church and school formed a twin core, supported by multiple networks of agents, as parents, business people, members of organizations etc. — research in social capital and education in the 21st century seldom looks at such nexus of networks — such approaches are rather found in studies of social capital and economy<sup>27</sup>. Research in the field of education has followed the gloomier picture of Putnam and does not expect to find such an nexus, but looks instead for central ties that can do the trick of social capital in an individualised society. Most commonly parent-child relations are investigated, and/or the school culture more generally, and often an indicator of broader community ties is found in parent-school relations and/or in the ethnic background of children and parents.

A good example is found in Crosnoe (2001) who has developed a scale for measuring parent-adolescent relationships along „three well-established dimensions of parenting: affective ties, shared activities, and security“ (p. 270). According to the author this measures not social capital itself but its channels, as do other measures applied in the study, student-teacher bonding in school and how parent-adolescent relations are reflected in school. Social capital is more directly measured through parent educational attainment, and finally the effects on school achievement is measured in two ways.

The result of this study is that both family-based and school-based social capital correlate with academic achievement and, furthermore, that they are not independent of each other. Thus the general finding is that school- and family-based social capital are clustered together. However, examining different groups in the sample, variations were found that support other research finding „that the academic performance of

<sup>26</sup> R. Crosnoe, *Social Capital and the Interplay of Families and Schools*, Journal of Marriage and Family, 2004, 66, 2, s. 268.

<sup>27</sup> S. Szreter, *Social Capital, the Economy, and Education in Historical Perspective*, [w:] *Social Capital. Critical Perspectives*, red. S. Baron, J. Field, T. Schullet, Oxford 2000.

African Americans is less reactive to family dynamics and that Asian Americans demonstrate a greater adult orientation than other groups.“ (p. 276)

Here Crosnoe joins the interest in differences between ethnic groups which has for a long time been a strong feature in studies on social capital. One can say, with Janet Holland et al (2007) and Jon Lauglo (2010), that social capital has become a metaphor or umbrella concept for finding background factors other than traditional SES measures, that can explain variations in school performance. Here ethnic groups, especially rather newly immigrated ethnic groups, are handy as distinguishable groups of different cultural patterns that have not yet been melted or moulded by SES structures in new surroundings.

For the last twenty years several research contributions have concluded that children of immigrants in the Western countries have achieved relatively better academically than the native populations, when controlled for social class and cultural capital. Gibson and Ogbu (1991) reasoned that members of immigrant minorities were „trying harder“. Steinberg (1997) supported the conclusion, and Zhou and Bankston (1994), Portes and MacLeod (1996) and Lauglo (2000) not only came to similar results but explained them by the concept of social capital. The immigrant children, who achieved more than their social class and cultural capital would suggest, came largely from cohesive families of close communities that supported and regulated their children.

Jon Lauglo (2000) analysed data from a questionnaire survey which covered 94% of all 15-17 years old in Oslo in 1996. He found that non-western immigrants scored significantly higher as regards family cohesion, effective monitoring and backup by parents and involvement with the school, and – more importantly – that this difference was the most likely to explain why the immigrant youth achieved more in school than could be expected from their social and cultural background.

In this discussion of the so-called immigrant ethos certain ethnic groups are frequently pointed out as high achievers, not least groups from the East Asian culture of Confucianism, while other groups like West-Indian immigrants in UK are pointed out as low achievers. However, one should be cautious to link such results with „ethnic culture“, as, firstly, this culture has been shaped by mechanisms of voluntary and involuntary migration, social structure in previous host areas etc. Secondly, the life conditions of migrant groups are differentiated by more factors than social class and cultural capital. For instance a recent study reports that immigrant businesses often contribute to social cohesion and educational motivation among immigrants who arrived in a new

country with little value of cultural capital and entered into the lowest social positions on the labour market.<sup>28</sup>

At least two caveats should be taken into account: Firstly, that the quantitative studies that suggest a democratic distribution of social capital are often time-limited, - the relation between cohesive regulation and school achievement is not documented in longitudinal studies. Could it not be the case that immigrant pupils under strict regulation of parents achieve relatively (controlled for social class and capital) higher than their native peers at the age of 15-17, while the native youth are to quite an extent using these years to test boundaries and develop peer relations and will often become late bloomers at the tertiary level? Entering the labour market they could be expected to use their wider social ties, while the hard-working immigrant youth will meet barriers of discrimination?

Secondly, studies that suggest a democratic distribution of social capital are often limited and based on crude measures. Thus, Lauglo's measure of cultural capital consists in counting books in the shelves at home, while other studies rely on children's reports on parents' education. Horvat (2003) argues, through a literature review and through her own intensive ethnographic research into social capital, that „parental networks vary across class categories“. With empirical and theoretical reference to Bourdieu and Passeron (1970), Bernstein (1974), McLaren (1998), Mehan et. al. (1996) and Stanton-Salazar, 1997) she argues that schools are essentially middle class institutions that reward middle-class behaviours. She describes the essential mechanism as follows:

... the behaviours that most easily map onto the expectations of teachers and others at school are those that are most likely to be rewarded. In the realm of social capital, the connections or parental networks that are the most valued in school settings are those that provide leverage in this middle-class environment. Parent's connections to middle-class professionals thus provide them with valuable capital in the school setting.<sup>29</sup>

In her own ethnographic research she finds clear class patterns. Middle class parents form contact with each other through frequent meetings, e.g. when they deliver kids to school and through leisure activities. They are more likely, than working class parents, to take joint action in relation to school and they have a lot more contacts with pro-

<sup>28</sup> Guðmundsson G., *'Quality spirals and vicious circles among children of immigrant entrepreneurs'*, Young – Nordic Journal of Youth Research (accepted for publication in 2013) in press.

<sup>29</sup> E. Horvat, McNamara, E.B. Weininger, A. Lareau, *From Social Ties to Social Capital*, s. 347 i n.

professionals, contacts which they use for the benefit of their children. Working class and poor parents have also several social ties, but primarily to their relatives and neighbours and they do not use these ties in relation to their children, and are far more passive in relation to school than middle class parents. Thus, social ties are turned into social capital by middle class parents, but not by working class parents.

The same can be derived from works of other British scholars, as Stephen Ball (2003), and others, who show how social relations are recognised and deployed as a capital within the field of education mainly by middle class. Social capital is in this perspective a tool to 'make a distinction'. The social capital of the middle class is rich, well-developed and directly helps in the selection and access to valuable goods. Young members of the middle-class may tap into the relationships and obligations of their parents, family and friends or gain access to people holding the necessary positions or having the necessary information. It is an example of the "strength of weak ties" (concept developed by M. Granovetter). People we know only as "friends of our friends" or "dad's colleague" may give us advice, indicate possible difficulties or provide with an idea of work and career in a given profession. It is a so-called hot knowledge. It enables one to eliminate certain possibilities, reject unrealistic plans and dreams. In this manner, one gains the ability to "manage aspirations" or "to put one's ambitions in order".<sup>30</sup> Moreover, participation in these networks constitutes a foundation for learning adequate social behaviours – ways of self-presentation, speaking, dressing, etc. As a result, middle-class youth know how to act, how to fill out an application form or how to behave at a job interview.

Apart from family resources, the efforts of a school aimed at building the social capital of pupils are important. As Ball points out, many private schools in the UK try to organise practical training for their students in places where these students can get in touch with specialists in the field they are interested in. Schools also use their own resources in the form of contacts with professors and lecturers at prestigious universities. The above pupil internships are not only an opportunity to observe specialists but also to build resources (young people receive advice on how to behave, how to organise their time at the university, what major to choose, etc.). In this way, by sending their children to an appropriate school, parents buy them a complex social capital.

School also constitutes a social resource through teachers who know how to guide and support adolescents in their efforts to be accepted by a prestigious university. They offer advice, show possibilities, help pu-

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<sup>30</sup> S. Ball, *Class strategies and the educational market. The middle classes and social advantage*, London 2003, s. 85.

pils manage their time and efforts. Another element is the possibility to participate in extracurricular activities at school and outside of school (photography courses, theatre, additional mathematics courses, piano classes). Thus, it is a space for creating a whole spectrum of cultural competencies.

## Conclusions

As this review has shown, like most often in serious scientific work, the concept of social capital does not offer a hocus-pocus concept to open up the solid cliffs of social inequality and reproduce barriers for educational reform. However it offers theoretical and methodological perspectives to examine important features in the social context of education – not one perspective but a few and some contradicting in crucial ways.

The review does not end with a judgement – we are not answering who is right, Coleman, Bourdieu, Putnam, Lin or ... The intention has rather been to open the field and make some demarcations. There is no need to try to settle the dispute, whether or when social capital is distributed in a fairly democratic way or whether and when it is mainly a part of reproductive mechanisms that also include economic and cultural capital, gender and ethnicity. A partial conclusion should be that social capital is a double-edged sword and only by action we can see which edge is the sharpest.

From the above review we can derive two optics of school analyses:

1. Education as a field of symbolic interplay and struggle for resources in the process of social allocation and reproduction – Bourdieu perspective.
2. School as an element of local community affected both by social circumstances and affecting social realm within which it is settled – Coleman's and Putnam's perspective.

Carrying out educational research with the usage of the social capital concept, we should primarily be looking for examples where social capital functions to enhance social mobility and dynamics of social ties. It can be assumed that historical studies can suit this purpose well, as changes and dynamics can simply be better identified over time and by some distance. However, such examples need not be old history. Educational reforms in the near future can learn more from recent history than from earlier epochs, but at the same time the distance can often help us to identify mechanisms that may be at work in our close vicinity but are hidden from us by our everyday 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu).

Furthermore we should explore available recent datasets on young people and their educational achievements looking for elements that can be used as indicators for social capital – family relations, relations between family and school etc. There are examples of qualitative studies that have explored elements of social capital, sometimes using the concept, sometimes not.

These studies should be done with different conceptualisations of social capital in mind. When we follow Coleman's lead and look for individual benefits from social capital, Bourdieu must be there too, to remind us to ask not only *cui bono* but also *cui male*. Are we talking about win-only situations or are the winners benefitting at the cost of others? Do the mechanisms, that produce social mobility for the few, also contribute to the reproduction for many? When we follow Putnam's lead and look for the creation of social capital in certain networks or communities, Bourdieu must also remind us to ask if such networking is creating benefits at the cost of some others.

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## Koncepcja kapitału społecznego i jej zastosowanie w badaniach edukacyjnych

### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie teoretycznych podstaw koncepcji kapitału społecznego. W ostatnim dziesięcioleciu pojęcie kapitału społecznego było prawdopodobnie najczęściej używanym pojęciem w międzynarodowej socjologii i na styku socjologii oraz analiz edukacyjnych. Kapitał społeczny stanowi jedną z podstawowych zmiennych objaśniających nierówności społeczne, zacofanie niektórych krajów i obszarów, poziom przestępczości i jakości życia (w znaczeniu gospodarczym i psychologicznym). Często w socjologicznych tekstach można jednak spotkać się z niezrozumieniem znaczenia koncepcji kapitału społecznego i błędnym rozpatrywaniem mechanizmów poprzez tę koncepcję wyjaśnianych. W artykule autorzy badają znaczenie tego terminu i sposoby wykorzystania tej koncepcji w badaniach edukacyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kapitał społeczny, edukacja, Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, Robert D. Putnam

